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RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE PRIORITY
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT PRIORITY 0170
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK PRIORITY 0052
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001584

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SUBJECT: INSPECTOR GENERAL OF PRISONS DESCRIBES CURRENT
PRISON CONDITIONS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Geeta Pasi, reason 1.4(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The Inspector General of Prisons, Brigadier General Md Zakir Hasan, recently discussed current jail conditions with POLOFF, and described his efforts to reform the prison system in Bangladesh. According to Hasan, the total prison population in Bangladesh (including those in jail awaiting trial, but not those detained in police stations) is approximately 86,100, which is 3.5 times greater than the country's maximum prison capacity. He touched on the incarcerations of U.N. Special Rapporteur and human rights activist Sigma Huda, as well as former prime ministers Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League and Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). END SUMMARY.

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PROGRAM OF REFORM
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12. (SBU) Brigadier General Md Zakir Hasan, the Inspector General of Prisons, recently discussed prison conditions and his ongoing reform of the prison system with POLOFF. As the top Bangladesh government official overseeing the prison system, Hasan runs a network of 67 prisons across the country. He assumed his position in 2005. Prior to his appointment, the Inspector General position was traditionally held by a military officer from the medical corps. Hasan is the first infantry officer to hold the job.

13. (SBU) Hasan provided statistics on the current prison population. He said he receives daily reports on how many prisoners have entered and departed the system, and that the current total number of prisoners that day was about 88,500. This number has been relatively stable for several months, after having risen from 72,000 at the beginning of the state of emergency in January. Between 1,150 and 1,200 prisoners enter and leave the system every day. (NOTE: These statistics match estimates by the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights and the Bangladesh office of the International Committee of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. END NOTE.)

14. (SBU) The prison population is currently 3.5 times over its maximum capacity of 27,000. Hasan has sought to shift prisoners around to relieve the most crowded jails, in Dhaka and other major cities, but it can be difficult because

prisoners often must appear in court in the city where they were convicted. Hasan hopes to increase the prison capacity by several thousands slots this year, and will be inaugurating a new prison in Chuaganga in northwestern Bangladesh in the middle of September.

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REHABILITATION, NOT JUST PUNISHMENT

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15. (SBU) According to Hasan, when he took over the prison system in 2005 corruption was rampant, prisoners were routinely abused, and prison employees' morale was abysmal. "My first thought was that prisons cannot be punishment centers, they have to be rehabilitation centers," he said. He said he noticed quickly that the prisons held not just bad people, but also many victims of circumstance, poorly educated people, and political prisoners who were involved in local disputes. "My job, as I saw it, was to rehabilitate them since these people are still a segment of society."

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A POORLY RUN PRISON SYSTEM...

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16. (SBU) Hasan said he saw firsthand major problems in the way the prisons were being run. There was no mutual respect, either amongst prisoners or between prison employees, and training for guards was non-existent. Prisoners had to bribe the guards for the rations they were entitled to, and were routinely placed in "bar-fitters" (a bar that connects ankle-cuffs and hand-cuffs) which were supposed to be reserved only for transporting prisoners. The only training given to prisoners was weaving and producing cheap cane

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furniture.

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IN DIRE NEED OF REFORM

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17. (SBU) The Inspector General described a series of reforms he has initiated since 2005. He introduced several measures aimed at improving employee training and morale, including introducing a new uniform, revising the training program, creating a health program for employees' families modeled on that of the military, and helping to subsidize their children's education. To address rampant corruption, he created an intelligence service within the prisons to report on abuse and bribery and to monitor prison conditions. He also managed to remove syndicates from the business of supplying prisons, a move that ran afoul of the members of parliament that ran them. (NOTE: Several of these MPs petitioned the Home Minister unsuccessfully for Hasan's removal. END NOTE.) To improve communication and promote more transparency, he instituted monthly "dharbars" or public meetings for prisoners and employees in each of the 67 prisons, presided over by the head of the prison to discuss problems and concerns without fear of retribution. Hasan also pushed through a major overhaul of the country's jail code, which governs how the prison system is operated.

18. (SBU) To provide skills for prisoners, Hasan formalized what had been ad hoc literacy classes, with educated prisoners as teachers. He started creating canteens staffed by prisoners, and opened a bakery, beauty salon, and electronic repair service in the Dhaka Central Prison to put prisoners to work. He acknowledged that poor conditions persist and that many of the changes are taking a long time to implement. Particularly in the beginning, some guards -- who could no longer collect bribes from prisoners to augment their income -- wrote poison pen letters trying to get Hasan removed, to no avail.

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FRUSTRATION WITH CURRENT CARETAKER GOVERNMENT

19. (C) Hasan was candid in expressing his frustrations about working under the present caretaker government. He said it was easier to push through changes when he had a direct line to former BNP Home Minister Lutfozzaman Babor. (NOTE: Babor himself is now in prison on corruption charges. END NOTE.) With the Home Ministry portfolio with the Chief Advisor, his access to the top has been limited. The Home Secretary is also stretched thin and is often not accessible. This means approvals that used to take days now can wait weeks for attention.

VIP PRISONERS PRESENT A "VERY DIFFICULT SITUATION"

110. (C) The Inspector General said that VIP prisoners presented a "very difficult situation" for him and that the prison system had to take special care of them. He said he had visited former prime ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia and toured their sub-jails. While neither of them will ever be happy to be incarcerated, he felt the prison system was taking excellent care of the two ladies. It is also costing the prison system precious resources; the government has a freeze on hiring new prison staff, yet the two ladies' sub-jails on the grounds of Parliament require dozens of prison officials to staff.

111. (C) Hasan dismissed Hasina's lawyers' demand that according to the jail code she is entitled to access to a cell phone. According to Hasina's lawyers, the jail code guarantee that prisoners can "communicate orally" implies the right to a phone. Hasan said that "oral communication" means the ability to speak face-to-face with family, friends, and attorneys. "It has never meant they can have cell phones, and no prisoner has had one." When his intelligence officers discovered Sigma Huda had bribed guards to permit her to keep a cell phone in her room, he made sure it was promptly taken

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away and the guards involved disciplined.

112. (C) Hasan also denied that Huda was being treated poorly. He said he was ensuring she had adequate access to her attorneys and to medical assistance, and he hoped, now that her trial had ended, the accusations from her family against the prison system would subside. He gave POLOFF his cell phone number, however, and urged that we contact him should we have any questions about Huda or other VIP prisoners.

COOPERATION WITH NGO'S "IMPORTANT"

113. (C) Alena Khan, president of the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR) said her organization has worked closely with Hasan to develop programs to help juveniles in prison. Hasan said that while non-governmental organizations can sometimes be difficult to work with, given the lack of resources and the contributions they can make, it was important to engage them.

COMMENT: AN AGENT OF CHANGE

114. (C) The Inspector General strikes us as an agent of change, willing to tackle a prison system that is not at the top of the government's long list of priorities. While there was definitely an element of public relations in his meeting with us, Hasan had a masterful grasp of data and seemed to know exactly what was happening in each of the country's 67 prisons. In addition, he displayed enthusiasm for his job, and seems truly committed to addressing the system's many

inadequacies in spite of a lack of resources and funding.
Pasi